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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 FREETOWN 000163

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W - OKEDIJI, AF/PDPA - LISENBY, G/IWI

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KPAO KWMN PHUM SL

SUBJECT: CELEBRATING WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

REF: A. 2007 FREETOWN 379

¶B. 2007 FREETOWN 386

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: To honor Women's History Month in Freetown, post hosted a series of events and programs aimed at empowering women with knowledge and providing forums through which to share information and ideas. The recent passage of three gender bills created a foundation and focus for most of the events, providing post with an opportunity to applaud government and civil society for their commitment to furthering gender equality, but also reminding them that considerable work in this area remains. The Ambassador and embassy staff will continue to play an active and vocal role in promoting women's empowerment through outreach and programming, while also reiterating to the upper echelons of government that women's equality is an imperative strategic element in Sierra Leone's development. END SUMMARY.

SEIZING THE MOMENT: THE PASSAGE OF GENDER BILLS GIVES NEW HOPE FOR EQUALITY

¶2. (U) The commemoration of Women's History Month in Freetown was particularly timely given the recent passage of three pieces of gender legislation, granting women improved protections in the areas of marriage, inheritance, and domestic violence (see reftel B). Approval of these laws is an excellent step towards gender equality by guaranteeing women's social and economic security. Despite the significance of these laws, however, discussions with women activists revealed that the provisions of the gender bills are not widely known among even the most educated classes of Sierra Leonean women.

¶3. (U) Access to, and knowledge of, critical pieces of legislation by the public is a noted problem in Sierra Leone. An additional grave problem is the limited infrastructure with which to implement new legislation. Besides the lack of general public awareness, the implementers themselves, such as law enforcement and the judiciary, have received limited outreach and training on the new provisions. A group of women activists attending a luncheon hosted by the Ambassador on March 26 highlighted these issues. The need for outreach is very great, as the passage of legislation has minimal impact if neither officials nor the public have the tools with which to ensure its effective implementation. Providing women with knowledge of their rights under these codes ensures that they can demand action if those rights are violated, and will give strength to their collective voice to publicly call for full and active enforcement of the laws.

¶4. (U) On March 27 the Ambassador hosted a panel discussion

on the gender bills that included representatives from the legal, parliamentary, and faith communities. Two leaders of the women lawyers' association, Sally Khatumal and Fatmata Bintu Alhadi, gave detailed overviews of the provisions of the laws. Member of Parliament Dr. Bernadette Lahai discussed the process by which the laws were enacted and the follow-up needed to ensure implementation. Freetown's chief imam, Sheikh Abu Bakarr Conteh, discussed the laws' parallels with Muslim law and their impact on customary law .The hall was packed with a mixture of government leaders who supported and opposed the legislation, gender rights activists, educators, and women who have been targeted for elections training by the USAID-funded National Democratic Institute. Participants expressed their thanks for an extremely informative and useful forum.

SHARING THE SIERRA LEONE EXPERIENCE: WOMAN JUDGE ATTENDS WOMEN AND JUSTICE ROUNDTABLE

¶15. (U) Embassy Freetown nominated and funded, with assistance from AF/PD, the attendance of a female Sierra Leonean judge to attend the Secretary's Round Table on Women and Justice in Washington, DC on March 12. Justice Salimatu Koroma, who sits on the appellate court, represented the women of Sierra Leone at the sessions. She made valuable contacts with peers from a variety of countries, sharing ideas and encouragement on overcoming obstacles which women around the world experience working in and through their country's judicial systems. Sierra Leone has several female judges, including, most notably, the Acting Chief Justice, but there is a need for more equitable gender representation on the bench. Post will continue to search for opportunities to support and encourage the current cadre of female judges.

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AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH THE MINISTER OF SOCIAL WELFARE, GENDER, AND CHILDREN'S AFFAIRS

¶16. (C) On March 27, Ambassador and poloff met with Minister of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA) Musu Kande. The Ambassador expressed her interest in, and support of, the issues relevant to the Ministry, and asked Minister Kande to provide information on her priorities and how the U.S. Government could assist in meeting those. Minister Kande noted the passage of the gender bills and the Children's Rights Act (see reftel A), and stated that sensitizing the public about these pieces of legislation and the rights of women and children is a significant challenge. The Minister also identified the devolution of power to the local governments as a pressing concern, as there is a need to train officials within these governments on various issues. Another priority for the Ministry is obtaining additional equipment, such as computers, to improve its efficiency.

¶17. (C) The Ambassador gave her support for these priorities, and promised to consider the feasibility of providing funding for capacity-building and awareness-raising initiatives. The Special Self-Help and Democracy and Human Rights Funds could be conduits through which to contribute to the efforts the Ministry is making to improve the lives of women and children across the country.

¶18. (C) COMMENT: Though not expressly mentioned during this meeting, poloff was told by a UNICEF contact that the Ministry is severely under-funded and that meeting their mandate will be next to impossible. Given that gender-based violence, child abuse, trafficking in persons, and child labor continue to be significant problems, the need to place more focus and resources into the Ministry is high. Thus, the Minister's plea for technical and material assistance comes

as no surprise. UNICEF contacts, however, are growing increasingly frustrated with constant, similar requests from the ministry that become the focus for conversation rather than the issues themselves. Contacts also stated the opinion that the Minister has little sway with Koroma, and that the administration's priorities do not appear to include social issues. While supporting the MSWGCA is a priority of post, reminding the government that they need to increase their focus here is an ancillary one. The Ambassador's recent meeting with the First Lady revealed her commitment to women's and children's issues, and she represents an important focal point for further engagement. END COMMENT.

SMALL FUTURE EFFORTS BY EMBASSY WILL REAP BIG REWARDS

¶9. (U) The need and desire for a public outreach campaign on the gender bills is readily apparent, and the embassy committed to holding outreach events, such as the March 27 panel, at a larger venue in Krio. A recording of this event can then be broadcast on radio stations nationwide. In addition, given that members of the public generally cannot afford to purchase a copy of the legislation from the government printing office, the embassy will explore means through which it can be popularized, such as via the internet or through the creation of illustrated information cards. Outreach will also be conducted with the MSWGCA to provide them with further information and documentation on funding opportunities.

COMMENT

¶10. (U) The Women's History Month events came at an auspicious time in Sierra Leone. The recent passage of laws to safeguard the rights of women and children creates a framework through which advocates, officials, and members of the public can work to ensure political, economic, and social security for these oft-marginalized members of the population. In addition, the July, 2008, local elections provide an opportunity for women to actively participate as candidates and voters. Women activists in Freetown are a vigorous and vocal group, but the need now is to reach and engage women in the outlying areas, ensuring that those in the provinces are aware of their rights and how to protect them. The embassy will continue to play a significant role in this effort, given our long-held recognition that women's empowerment is a critical element in furthering Sierra Leone's development. END COMMENT.

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